Editorial from Common Ground[1]

Issue 289, August 2015

With a crucial federal election looming, it is important that Canadians find a way to redeem the federal government after Stephen Harper's nine-year train wreck. Harper's neo-cons cheated and lied to take over the Progressive Conservative [Party] and devolve it into the Conservative Party of Canada… They went on to cheat in the last three elections—robo calls, campaign over-spending, withholding information on the purchase of F-35 fighter jets, denying climate change, closing down scientific research, dragging Canada into war, and now using our tax dollars to bribe us with [a] child tax credit.

It doesn't stop there. They gerrymandered electoral boundaries, installed 30 new ridings, and renamed 31 others to further confuse people. With such tactics their intent is obvious: keep power no matter what.

Harper's dictatorial control is double-speak in the form of the Fair Elections Act. It will be as fair as its big corporate supporters south of the border—who want to keep control of Canada's resources, export our wealth, while ignoring our civil liberties and environment [—will allow]. We cannot let this Conservative carnage continue.

The action of Brigette DePape, who held up a STOP HARPER sign in the House of Commons, has proven prophetic. Harper's list of damage is long. We need a new government that will have the strength of conviction to save Canada.

So with that in mind we introduce the leader of the Official Opposition, Tom Mulcair. What impresses us most is what he has done, not just what he has said—in particular, his commitment to protect the environment when he was the environment minister in Quebec. When he stood up to Premier Charest to protect a park from condo development, it cost him his cabinet privilege. He sat as a back-bencher to fulfill his term,

Prime Minister Stephen Harper

then quit the Quebec Liberals. Later he was invited to join the NDP. But by caring deeply and doing what was fair, legal, and in the best interest of the public he protected the commons from privatisation.
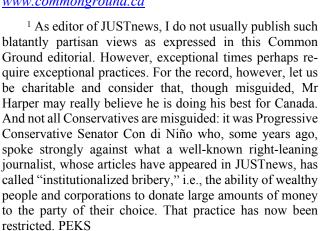
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The storm clouds are gathering. Harper has done his darndest to fix the game in his favour. His operatives have attacked Justin Trudeau, Elizabeth May and now they will turn their propaganda machine on Mulcair. It is…up to each of us to see through their fog of election war, to learn from recent history, to be clear about principles, to participate in our riding campaigns and support candidates who are best able to change the Government of Canada for the better.

Our actions and decision today will affect generations to come. Get involved, learn from history; and vote.

Common Ground is a free monthly magazine printed in Vancouver, B.C. The August, 2015 issue, in which the above editorial was printed, reports, "For 33 years Common Ground has been inspiring readers in Western Canada and gaining ground. We are expanding to Toronto and Ottawa with two new eastern editions. Tell your friends…" www.commonground.ca

[1] As editor of JUSTnews, I do not usually publish such blatantly partisan views as expressed in this Common Ground editorial. However, exceptional times perhaps require exceptional practices. For the record, however, let us be charitable and consider that, though misguided, Mr Harper may really believe he is doing his best for Canada. And not all Conservatives are misguided: it was Progressive Conservative Senator Con di Niño who, some years ago, spoke strongly against what a well-known right-leaning journalist, whose articles have appeared in JUSTnews, has called "institutionalized bribery," i.e., the ability of wealthy people and corporations to donate large amounts of money to the party of their choice. That practice has now been restricted. PEKS

Proportional Representation

Editor's note: I was asked by a Board Member of Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice to include an article on proportional representation (PR) in this Autumn 2015 Discussion Paper which is appearing shortly before the October federal election. Upon searching the internet for such an article, I was surprised to find most articles referred to the U.S. or U.K. situations, and included a lot of misinformation. After a non-exhaustive search, I found the article below, written for Canadian Parliamentarians in 2004. I am indebted to Wendy Bergerud, a past and present Board Member of Fair Vote Canada, past member of the B.C. Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, and current President of the Victoria Chapter of FVC for a few corrections and additions to this article, and for suggesting where it needed updating.

What Is Proportional Representation?

Proportional representation (PR) is a system of parliamentary representation in which the number of seats each party has in the House of Commons is in proportion to its share of the popular vote. There are several types of proportional representation voting systems (Table 1). Currently, Canada has a "first-past-the-post" (FPTP) system, also known as a "single-member plurality" system. To win a seat in the House of Commons, a candidate must receive the most votes in an electoral district, but he or she does not need to get more than 50% of the vote (an absolute majority). Indeed, in the 2011 general election, less than half of the 145 candidates (47%), received an absolute majority of votes in their ridings.

What Are the Problems With the Current System?

The main criticism of Canada's FPTP system is that a party's share of the national vote is not necessarily reflected in its share of parliamentary seats. Some parties receive a greater share of seats than their share of the vote, while some receive a lesser share. As shown in Table 2 (page 4), in five of the six general elections between 1988 and 2011, the governing party received a majority of the seats in the House of Commons while receiving less than half the popular vote. At the same time, opposition parties with support that was widely spread across the country—such as the NDP from 1998 to 2004, and the Progressive Conservative Party from 1993 to 2000, among other examples—were under-represented in Parliament. (The most extreme example

was in 1993, when the Progressive Conservatives received 16% of the vote, but only 2 seats (0.7% of the total).) On the other hand, the percentage of seats won by regionally based parties—such as the Bloc Québécois—was closer to its percentage of the popular vote. Although the 2004 election produced results that were somewhat more proportional than earlier elections, parties such as the Liberals and the Bloc Québécois were rewarded by the FPTP system, while the NDP was penalized.

Critics of the current system also argue that, in addition to producing disproportionate results, it results in the under-representation of women, minority groups and Aboriginal peoples, and that there is less diversity in the House of Commons than in Canadian society at large.

Furthermore, many argue that the FPTP system "disregards" a large number of votes—about half of those who vote don't elect anyone. These voters may feel as though their votes did not matter and may be discouraged from voting.

What Forms of Proportional Representation Have Been Proposed for Canada?

In 2004, the Law Commission of Canada issued a report entitled *Voting Counts: Electoral Reform for Canada*, in which it proposed a mixed member proportional electoral system based on the Scottish system. Under this proposal, two-thirds of the members of the House of Commons would be elected in constituency races using the first-past-the-post method, and the remaining one-third would be elected from provincial or territorial party lists. In addition, one list seat each would be allotted to Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, and Yukon. To distribute the seats, the total number of votes cast for a party list in a province would be divided by the number of constituencies won by that party, plus one. The "plus one" would ensure that parties that did not win a constituency seat would still be eligible for a list seat. (For further explanation of mixed member proportional systems, see the Law Commission of Canada, *Voting Counts: Electoral Reform for Canada*, Ottawa, 2004, pp. 90-99; http://www.publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection/J31-61-2004E.pdf.)

Meanwhile, a number of provinces have reviewed their electoral systems and are considering proportional representation as an option for reform. In addition, several public interest groups promote proportional representation. They include *Fair Vote*

TABLE 1
Proportional Representation Electoral Systems

System	Operations	Where Used
Proportional Representation (PR) Systems		
List-PR	Voters vote for a party, each of which presents a list of candidates.	Most European democracies
Single Transferable Vote (STV)	Voters rank-order candidates in multi-member districts.	Ireland, Malta, Australian Senate
Mixed Member Proportional (MMP)	Voters vote twice: once for a constituency MP who is elected by the first-past-the-post method and once for a party, which presents a list of candidates. The party's share of seats is determined by the party's share of the vote, and the number of constituency seats is subtracted from this total.	Germany, Scotland, Wales, New Zealand
Semi-Proportional Representation Systems		
Single Non-Transferable Vote	Voters vote for one candidate in multi-seat districts. Candidates with the highest vote totals win.	Jordan, Vanuatu, Taiwan
Parallel or Mixed Member Majoritarian	Voters vote for a constituency MP and for a party, which presents a list of candidates. Unlike the MMP system, however, these systems do not compensate for any disproportionality within the constituencies.	Japan, Russia, South Korea

Source: Law Commission of Canada, *Voting Counts: Electoral Reform for Canada*

Canada, *Mouvement pour une démocratie nouvelle, Equal Voice,* and *Fair Voting BC*.

In 1979, the Task Force on Canadian Unity (the Pepin-Robarts Task Force) proposed a mixed member proportional system based on the German model. It proposed adding 60 seats to the House of Commons (then 282 seats), with the additional seats allocated to parties on the basis of their national vote, and then distributed among the provinces.

The Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada (the Macdonald Commission), on the other hand, was skeptical about the introduction of proportional representation for the House of Commons. In its 1985 report, it judged that a mixed member proportional system would be too expensive and complicated, and raised questions about creating two classes of MPs. The 1991 report of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (the Lortie Commission) did not recommend changing the current system.

Proportional representation systems have also been proposed by academics. (An overview of these proposals is included in a paper by F. Leslie Seidle entitled "Electoral System Reform in Canada: Objectives, Advocacy and Implications for Governance;" http://cprn.org/documents/16305_en.pdf). In addition to variants of the mixed member proportional system, there have been proposals for a single transferable vote system and a mixed system under which 20% of seats would be allocated to parties according to their regional vote shares for the first-past-the-post seats. There have also been proposals for an "alternative vote" system. Voters rank-order candidates, and the lowest-ranked candidates are dropped and their votes redistributed until one candidate has a majority. This, however, is not a proportional system, but a plurality-majority system that is slightly different from Canada's current system.

What Could Be the Impact on Parliament?

Adding an element of proportionality to Canada's electoral system would have significant implications for Parliament. Some of these might be:

- **A more representative Parliament.** The number of seats won by political parties would more closely match their electoral support.
- **More, smaller parties.** Because the threshold for admission for new parties would be lower, movements such as the Greens might have a better chance at winning seats. Indeed, more parties are represented in the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales under proportional representation than there were under their previous first-past-the-post systems. [In Canada, only the Greens would likely get more seats.]
- **Fewer, larger constituencies.** Under the proposed mixed member proportional systems, there would be fewer constituency

TABLE 2
Discrepancy between the Percentage of Popular Vote and Percentage of Parliamentary seats

Party	Percentage of Popular Vote	Elected Members	Percentage of Parliamentary Seats
General Election of 2 May 2011			
Liberal Party	18.9%	34	11.0%
Conservative Party	39.6%	166	53.9%
Bloc Quebecois	6.0%	4	1.3%
New Democratic Party	30.6%	103	33.4%
Green Party	3.9%	1	0.3%
Other	0.9%	0	0.0%
Total	100%	308	100%
General Election of 28 June 2004			
Liberal Party	37%	135	43.8%
Conservative Party	30%	99	32.1%
Bloc Quebecois	12%	54	17.5%
New Democratic Party	16%	19	6.2%
Other	4%	1	0.3%
Total	100%	308	100%
General Election of 27 November 2000			
Liberal Party	40.8%	172	57.1%
Canadian Alliance	25.5%	66	21.9%
Bloc Quebecois	10.7%	38	12.6%
New Democratic Party	8.5%	13	4.3%
Progressive Conservative	12.2%	12	4.0%
Other	2.3%	0	0%
Total	100%	301	100%
General Election of 2 June 1997			
Liberal Party	38.5%	155	51.5%
Reform Party	19.4%	60	19.9%
Bloc Quebecois	10.7%	44	14.6%
New Democratic Party	11.0%	21	7.0%
Progressive Conservative	18.8%	20	6.6%
Other	1.6%	1	0.3%
Total	100%	301	100%
General Election of 25 November 1993			
Liberal Party	41.3%	177	60.0%
Bloc Quebecois	13.5%	54	18.3%
Reform Party	18.7%	52	17.6%
New Democratic Party	6.9%	9	3.1%
Progressive Conservative	16.0%	2	0.7%
Other	3.6%	1	0.3%
Total	100%	295	100%
General Election of 21 November 1998			
Progressive Conservative	43.0%	169	57.3%
Liberal Party	31.9%	83	28.1%
New Democratic Party	20.4%	43	14.6%
Other	4.7%	0	0%
Total	100%	295	100%

MPs. Constituencies would therefore be larger.

- **Changed roles for MPs.** Some observers are concerned that, if there were two "classes" of MPs—constituency MPs and list MPs—list MPs would have a lower status. The list MPs would likely have a lighter constituency workload and be able to devote more time to policy issues. However, the experience in Germany and New Zealand suggests that there would be little tension between the two types of MPs.

- **Less regional polarization.** Party caucuses would be more likely to include representatives from most major provinces.

- **More coalition cabinets.** Single-party majority governments would likely become the exception. If the experience of proportional representation in other countries is anything to go by, coalition cabinets would be more frequent than minority governments. At the same time, cabinets would tend to be less durable. [*In New Zealand, the Cabinet has also been strengthened vis-á-vis the PM because almost all Cabinets since 1996 have been composed of members from two or more parties, eliminating the ability of the PM to simply demand greater party discipline. Paraphrased from Democratizing the Constitution, p. 148, by Peter Aucoin, Mark D. Jarvis and Lori Turnbull.*]

- **Weaker prime ministers.** Coalition cabinets would likely limit the ability of the prime minister to act independently.

- **More powerful committees.** In both the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, committees have played a greater role, both in scrutiny and policy formation. They have been no less partisan, however.

- **Longer term stability from one government to the next and a more consensual form of government**. Because a coalition government better represents the voters' different views, there is less tendency to make radical changes from one ruling party to the next in subsequent elections. *(This paragraph added to original article.)*

What Could Be the Effect on the Representation of Women and Minorities?

Although proportional representation voting systems tend to improve the chances of women and members of minority groups being elected, the electoral system is not the only factor involved. Their level of representation also depends on the policies of political parties, because the parties would continue to nominate the candidates for both the constituency and list seats.

The Law Commission of Canada addressed this problem by recommending that Parliament require political parties to develop initiatives and policies to promote equal representation of women and greater representation of minority group members and Aboriginal people. In addition, it recommended that the federal government, in consultation with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, explore the possibility of introducing Aboriginal Electoral Districts.

What Could Be the Effect on Voter Turnout?

Proponents of proportional representation argue that it would lead to higher voter turnout. It remains unclear whether this would be the case, however. A study of the experience with proportional representation in Scotland and Wales found the impact of new electoral systems upon turnout was unproven. In addition, it should be noted that according to the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), voter turnout around the world has been in decline since the mid-1980s. It is likely that other factors—such as attitudes towards the parliamentary process (particularly among younger voters) or the closeness of the electoral race—contribute to turnout rates.

What Are Some of the Concerns About Proportional Representation?

One of the main criticisms of proportional representation systems is that they tend to produce minority and coalition governments. These governments are … less durable than majority governments because they rely on consensus to pass legislation, [but because PR leads to consensual government, these governments' policies have longer-term stability even if the governments themselves aren't able to "stay in power" as long.]

Under certain proportional representation systems, such as mixed member proportional systems, the size of constituencies would likely increase substantially. Larger ridings would not only have larger populations but also, in many cases, cover more territory. Members of the House of Commons repeatedly emphasize the budgetary and time constraints they face, and larger ridings, even with the possibility of an additional list MP, might not be a welcome change.

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http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/LOP/ResearchPublications/tips/PDF/tip120-e.pdf

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If I were Jiminy Cricket—Three First Steps…

If I were Jiminy Cricket, I'd sit on the shoulder of Canada's newly elected Prime Minister and whisper in his ear, "It's not just regime change we need—we need culture change!"

The PM looks surprised. "Huh? What's wrong with our culture?"

"After two decades of neo-liberal philosophy and economics you have to ask? Humans! Primarily the problem is the idea that money is more important than people."

"So, how am I supposed to change the culture?"

"Just three steps to start the snowball rolling. These steps could save Canada—and humanity," answers Jiminy.

The PM looks at him, sceptical. "Suppose the snowball doesn't roll."

"Then Canada and humanity are not worth saving. The world is safer with insects."

Long pause. "Okay." The Prime Minister nods. "Tell me."

"The steps are not what you might expect, like taking action on climate change, or revitalizing the economy, or creating more jobs, or any of the other important tasks facing a new government. But they're vital to your future."

The PM sighs. "Go ahead. Tell me," he repeats.

"Here's what's needed." Jiminy holds up one of his six legs.

"Step 1, Implement some form of proportional representation in your voting system. Two of the four national Canadian political parties have pledged to implement such a system. A third party is waffling, and only the retrograde Conservative Party will not countenance it.

"Step 2, Make wealth distribution in Canada more equal. You may have nothing against wealthy people, but exaggerated unequal wealth—which recent governments have been encouraging—leads to feelings of entitlement among the rich that will have horrible repercussions as humanity moves through the difficult next 50-100 years.

"Step 3, Implement the UN's long-time goal for every developed nation to contribute 0.7% of its GDP to developing countries—but much of this 0.7% must be directed towards education of children, in particular girls."

"Why do you think these steps would work?" asks the Prime Minister.

Underlying Assumptions

"My underlying belief or assumption behind these steps," continues Jiminy, "is first that humanity is basically good, and second that many brains from different backgrounds working together on a problem are more likely to come up with a correct solution than a few brains from a select slice of humanity. In other words, I believe that a true democracy, not the one currently extant in Canada, is the only tool you have to solve the myriad of complex problems facing you that, if left unresolved, will destroy civilization as you know it through a descent into unfettered violence and war."

Jiminy shudders at the thought, but continues, "If the assumption is untrue that humanity is basically good, then humans are not worth saving."

The Prime Minister rolls his eyes.

"Democracy, like science," continues Jiminy, "can sometimes lead to incorrect solutions, but, like science, it is inherently self-correcting. Other means of implementing solutions are not—at least, not without resorting to violence."

"Where did you learn all that?" asks the Prime Minister.

"In your history classes," replies Jiminy, "while you were firing spit balls at the teacher behind her back."

"Keep quiet about that." The PM tries unsuccessfully to brush Jiminy off his shoulder.

But Jiminy is not easily shrugged off. He continues, implacably, "Here is why these three steps are vital.

Electoral Reform

"Democracy in Canada, and that in many other countries, is in a shambles. You have just experienced 11 years of a Prime Minister who greatly weakened an already faulty Canadian democracy. Many steps are needed to strengthen your democracy, but a basic one, and the easiest to implement at the moment, is reform of your electoral system.

"With proper proportional representation, you will never again have a majority government representing only 30-something percent of the population implementing policies that the majority of Canadians do not want. Proportional representation may result in more minority governments, which will force some parties to compromise and work together. This may slow implementation of needed policies, but at least they will be policies that are well thought through,

which is better than continuing a wrong policy for an extended period. I would hope that such governments, coalitions or not, would work to strengthen other areas of your democracy—much is needed.

The PM looks sideways at Jiminy. "I suppose you picked that up in my poli-sci classes. I wasn't firing spit balls then—there was too much important information on how to gain power—"

"That's another problem," interrupts Jiminy, "but don't try to distract me from what I'm trying to tell you. Here's what's important about the next step.

Reducing Disparity in Wealth

"Countries with lesser disparities in wealth amongst their citizenry have fewer problems than countries with large disparities. Wealthy people tend to think they can buy their way out of problems, and that they deserve to because of personal talents, or inheritance of station (both these are pure luck) or because they have worked hard.

"But there are many people who have worked just as hard and ended up through accident or bad luck impoverished. Some people have the bad luck to be born in a poor country. And some people are simply unable to take care of themselves, but may still have brilliant minds or talents that in the right situation could contribute to society. The book *The Glass Castle* provides much insight into this sort of situation. Many privileged people have abused their power and station to the detriment of society.

"Countries with smaller disparities in wealth have citizens with better health, less crime, more trust among one another, and have societies that are more innovative." (For a fuller list of advantages to smaller disparities in wealth, see Wilkinson's and Pickett's, The Spirit Level, 2010, summarized in JUSTnews Discussion Paper No. 22, or one of several more recent books).

"The unwillingness of developed countries to accept refugees from war-torn developing countries, and to see those refugees as somehow bad or of lesser value than themselves is the result, at least in part, of disparities in wealth at the national/international level. The way European countries have treated refugees from African countries recently may be understandable, but is nonetheless despicable.

"And as populations increase, sea-levels rise and climate change reduces resources world-wide, the numbers of refugees around the world will increase—enormously. If this situation is not to devolve into a third world war that will kill far more people than the first two world wars combined, you must become a more compassionate, caring culture. Decreasing disparity in wealth will help to accomplish that."

"Humph," says the PM.

Educating Children in Developing Countries

"Which brings me to the third step," continues Jiminy, un-phased, "expenditure of 0.7% of developed countries' GDP on education, particularly of girls, in developing countries. Education, particularly of girls, has a vital side-effect: reduction in population growth.

"If human living standards are not to crumble in the next few decades to pre-industrial levels or worse, world population must be reduced. It will be reduced one way or another anyway, through violence, starvation or nuclear holocaust. Surely it is better to reduce it humanely and by choice through education of girls, which we know works.

"Besides, raising the level of education of people in developing countries will lessen if not resolve many other forthcoming problems of food and water shortages, economic collapse, etc. All those brains in developing countries are currently a largely untapped human resource. You are foolish to ignore them."

"Have you finished yet?" asks the PM.

"In conclusion," continues Jiminy,

"Although these three steps will not resolve humanity's immediate problems, I cannot think of a single major current or forthcoming problem that they, singly or together, will not help resolve, directly or indirectly. They will create the culture in which the needed solutions to those problems can be imagined and implemented.

"Over the past few decades, the number of non-governmental organizations created to try to resolve problems has exploded. But governments have largely remained deaf to the pleas and entreaties of those NGOs. Reforming your electoral system, reducing your disparity in wealth, and educating girls in developing countries will do much to increase compassion in developed countries, open the ears of current governments and ameliorate some of the looming disasters you have read so much about in previous JUSTnews Discussion Papers."

"Be off!" shouts the Prime Minister as he tries to squash the pestilent bug.

But Walt Disney had changed an unnamed cricket into Pinocchio's conscience, a grasshopper called Jiminy, and with one frantic leap Jiminy jumps to safety. As he had said, insects will survive. But will humanity?

PEKS

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The CUSJ purposes are:

- to develop and maintain a vibrant network of Unitarian social ac-
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ian principles and values in matters of social justice and in
particular
- to provide opportunities, including through publication of newslet-
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